GUIDE TO THE NT20 WASHO FILE

[The NT20 Washo file contains specific data on the Washo Indians of Nevada and California. Their territory specifically included the western edge of the Great Basin and the Sierra Nevada mountains around Lake Tahoe. They were neighbors of the Northern Paiute and the Miwok and Maidu of California. Their culture was more closely related to the cultures of the Great Basin than to the Californian cultures, although elements of the latter were present. The Washo language belongs to the Hokan phylum. The Washo were nomadic hunters and gatherers. The basic economic and political unit was the extended family. Large gatherings occurred for cooperative food gathering expeditions and games and ceremonies. There were three loosely defined territorial groupings. There is little known directly about Washo social organization. d'Azevedo et al. attribute this to the fact that the Washo failed to unite against the white people and hence the white people, both the settlers and the scholars, failed to take notice of them as a group. The reservation system was never instituted, but the Washo did receive scattered allotments in the early 1900's.

Kroeber estimated that in pre-contact times the population of the Washo was approximately 1,500. Reports from the early 1900's gave dwindling population figures. For example, Lowie estimated that there were about 300 Washos in 1926. Others predicted eminent extinction of the Washos. Downs, however, felt that these estimates were in error due to the scattered nature of the population and the fragmentation of society that had taken place. In 1961

he estimated "impressionistically" that there were about 2,000 Indians who considered themselves to be Washos and that they formed a "viable cultural unit" (4: Downs, p. 365A).

Price estimated that aboriginally the population density was the highest of any of the Great Basin cultures -- approximately 2.7 square miles per person. The average for the Great Basin was 15 square miles per person. Price attributes the high density to the comparatively abundant environment inhabited by the Washos.

There are nine sources in the NT20 file. The basic orienting sources are 1: Lowie and 5: Kroeber. 2: Barrett is on selected items of material culture. 3: Cartwright is an article on a Washo girl's puberty ceremony. 4: Downs is on Washo religion. He also deals with the patterns of cultural change since the coming of the white people. 6: Price is a study of the function and scope of economics. He also gives a cultural summary as an introduction to his study of economics. 7: Freed is on the changes in social organization from aboriginal times to the present. 8: Merriam and d'Azevedo is on peyotism among the Washo. 9: d'Azevedo et al. is a collection of nine essays on the Washo by a number of different authors covering many different subjects.

The file is a well-rounded one considering the apparent dearth of data on many aspects of Washo life. The researcher is advised however that much of the data in the file is the result of memory ethnographies and he or she should not be mislead by the frequent use of the ethnographic present. The file was processed between 1965 and 1969.]